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THE ABYSSINIAN PARADISE IN COLERIDGE AND MILTON

In his *Poems of Coleridge*, p. 292, Dr. Garnett annotates the allusion to Abyssinia in *Kubla Khan* as follows:

L. 40. *Singing of Mount Abora*. There seems to be no mountain of this name in Abyssinia at the present day, though one may be mentioned by some ancient traveler. Whether this be the case, or whether the mountain be Coleridge's invention, the name must be connected with the river Atbara, the Astaboras of the ancients, which rises in Abyssinia and falls into the Nile near Berber. The principal affluent of this river is the Tacazze = *terrible*, so called from the impetuosity of its stream. If Coleridge knew this, an unconscious association with the impetuosity of the river he had been describing may have led to the apparently far-fetched introduction of the Abyssinian maid into a poem of Tartary.

Abora might be a variant spelling, not only of *Atbara*, but of *Amara* in some old itinerary or, say, in one of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century books that touch on the location of the paradise terrestrial. I have not, however, been able to find the variant in anything that Coleridge read. Presumably he read many both of the earlier and of the later travelers. One of the later, the best authority that he could have for his knowledge of Abyssinia, was James Bruce, whose *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile* fell into Coleridge's hand perhaps as early as 1794.¹ It is barely possible that Coleridge borrowed the book from Southey, for the latter's library in 1844 contained a copy of the Dublin (1790) edition. Bruce, of course, mentions the river *Astaboras* or *Atbara*, as well as *Atbara*, a peninsula, and *Amhara* (compare *Amara*), a "division of country." He speaks of the *Tacazzè* also, remarking on the contrast between its placidity at one season² and its turbulence when swollen with rain:

But three fathoms it certainly had rolled in its bed; and this prodigious body of water, passing furiously from a high ground in a very deep descent, tearing up rocks and large trees in its course, and forcing down

¹ *Coleridge's Poems: Facsimile Reproduction*, p. 173.

² Edinburgh edition (1790), Vol. III, p. 157.

their broken fragments scattered on its stream, with a noise like thunder echoed from a hundred hills, these very naturally suggest an idea, that, from these circumstances, it is very rightly called the *terrible*.¹

Some of the diction and imagery here reminds one of Coleridge's tumultuous river *Alph*. However, there is in general not enough of the fabulous about Bruce to warrant the supposition that Coleridge is indebted to him for much of *Kubla Khan*, full though that poem be of the spirit of the "old travellers." In any case, I cannot believe that Dr. Garnett has hit upon the "unconscious association" that brought Abyssinia into "a poem of Tartary."

For that matter, I cannot regard "poem of Tartary" as an entirely fitting name for Coleridge's sensuous vision. This might preferably be termed a dream of the terrestrial, or even of the "false," paradise; since, aside from its unworthy, acquiescent admission of demoniac love within so-called "holy" precincts,² it reads like an arras of reminiscences from several accounts of natural³ or enchanted parks, and from various descriptions of that elusive and danger-fraught garden which mystic geographers have studied to locate from Florida to Cathay.⁴ Like the Tartar paradise at the beginning of *Kubla Khan* and the bewitched inclosure of the Old Man of the Mountain which seems to appear toward the end,⁵ this Abyssinian hill in the middle is simply one of those "sumptuous" retreats whose allurements occupied the imagination of a marvel-hunter like Samuel Purchas. It is certainly not "Coleridge's invention." The Portuguese Alvarez passed by the mountain *Amara* in Abyssinia and was acquainted with the myth concerning it.⁶ Incidentally he speaks of a city

¹ Edinburgh edition (1790), Vol. III, p. 158.

² A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

— *Kubla Khan*, ll. 14-16

³ For example, Bartram's descriptions of Georgia and Florida in his *Travels*, etc (Philadelphia, 1791).

⁴ See the authorities cited in Pierre Daniel Huet's *La situation du paradis terrestre* (Paris, 1711).

⁵ Compare *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1617), p. 428.

⁶ See his account (chap. 54) in Ramusio.

in that region, called *Abra*, the name of which may in some way be connected with Coleridge's *Abora*.

However, if we do not demand unusual exactitude in the poet's handling of proper names, we need not go far afield to discover his mountain; no farther, in fact, than the volume which he says he was reading before he fell asleep and dreamed his *Kubla Khan*. Purchas has an entire chapter of his *Pilgrimage*, entitled "Of the Hill Amara," in which he has collected the substance of the stories about that fabulous spot. An excerpt or two from him may serve in identification:

The hill Amara hath alreadie been often mentioned, and nothing indeed in all Ethiopia more deserueth mention. . . . This hill is situate as the naul of that Ethiopian body, and center of their Empire, vnder the Equinoctiall line, where the Sun may take his best view thereof, as not encountering in all his long iourny with the like Theatre, wherein the Graces & Muses are actors, no place more graced with Natures store, . . . the Sunne himself so in loue with the sight, that the first & last thing he vieweth in all those parts is this hill. . . . Once, Heauen and Earth, Nature and Industrie, have all been corriuals to it, all presenting their best presents, to make it of this so louely presence, some taking this for the place of our Fore-fathers Paradise. And yet though thus admired of others, as a Paradise, it is made a Prison to some [i. e., the princes of Abyssinia], on whom Nature had bestowed the greatest freedome. . . .¹

This, then, is the *Mount Abora* of which Coleridge (or his slave-girl) sings, a paradise which he is led to compare with that of Tartary by the most intimate of mental associations. It is also the *Mount Amara* of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, occurring in a section of that poem with which I can fancy the author of *Kubla Khan* as especially familiar; in the fourth book, where Milton offers his marvelous description of the authentic paradise terrestrial, distinguishing it carefully from sundry false claimants:

Nor, where Abassin kings their issue guard,
Mount Amara (though this by some supposed
True Paradise) under the Ethiop line
By Nilus' head, enclosed with shining rock
A whole day's journey high, but wide remote
From this Assyrian garden. . . .²

¹ Purchas (1617), p. 843.

² *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, ll. 280-86.

When the industrious Todd¹ pointed out a connection between these lines and Purchas' chapter on Mount Amara, quoting the passage given below from the *Pilgrimage*, he failed to note that later on in the fourth book Milton had, in spite of his distinction, to all appearances levied on Purchas' description of the false Abyssinian garden for embellishment of the true "Assyrian." Purchas goes on with the account of his "hill."

It is situate in a great Plaine largely extending it selfe every way, without other hill in the same for the space of 30. leagues, the forme thereof round and circular, the height such, that it is a daies worke to ascend from the foot to the top; round about, the rock is cut so smooth and euen, without any vnequall swellings, that it seemeth to him that stands beneath, like a high wall, whereon the Heauen is as it were propped: and at the top it is over-hanged with rocks, iutting forth of the sides the space of a mile, bearing out like mushromes, so that it is impossible to ascend it. . . . It is above twenty leagues in circuit compassed with a wall on the top, well wrought, that neither man nor beast in chase may fall downe. The top is a plaine field, onely toward the South is a rising hill, beautifying this plaine, as it were with a watch-tower, not seruing alone to the eye, but yeelding also a pleasant spring which passeth through all that Plaine . . . and making a Lake, whence issueth a River, which hauing from these tops espied Nilus, never leaves seeking to find him, whom he cannot leave both to seeke and finde. . . . The way vp to it is cut out within the Rocke, not with staires, but ascending by little and little, that one may ride vp with ease; it hath also holes cut to let in light, and at the foote of this ascending place, a faire gate, with a *Corpus du Garde*. Halfe way vp is a faire and spacious Hall cut out of the same rocke, with three windowes very large vpwards: the ascent is about the length of a lance and a halfe: and at the top is a gate with another gard. . . . There are no Cities on the top, but palaces, standing by themselves, in number four and thirtie, spacious, sumptuous, and beautifull, where the Princes of the Royall blood have their abode with their Families. The Souldiers that gard the place dwell in Tents.²

This sunlit and symmetrical hill, with its miracle of inner carven passages, may partially explain Coleridge's "sunny dome" and "caves of ice" (why *of ice?*) which must have puzzled more than one reader in *Kubla Khan*. The preceding lines from Milton should also be compared, and, as I have hinted, the following as well:

¹ *Milton's Poetical Works*, ed. Todd (1809), Vol. III, pp. 101, 102.

² Purchas (1617), p. 844.

. . . . the setting Sun
 Slowly descended, and with right aspect
 Against the eastern gate of Paradise
 Levelled his evening rays. It was a rock
 Of alabaster, piled up to the clouds,
 Conspicuous far, winding with one ascent
 Accessible from Earth, one entrance high;
 The rest was craggy cliff, that overhung
 Still as it rose, impossible to climb.
 Betwixt these rocky pillars Gabriel sat,
 Chief of the angelic guards ¹

There are, it is true, too many points of similarity in the various paradises of The Fathers and geographers to permit the critic to say with great assurance that Milton or Coleridge borrowed this or that embellishment of his mystical inclosure from any one prior writer. We are dealing here, I presume, with a world-old effort of imagination showing certain reappearing essentials of an inherited conception, such as a fountain with outflowing "sinuous rills," a symmetrical mountain, a disappearing "sacred river," all within a wall of measured circuit, and the like, the chief of which may be found in a poem of small compass like *Kubla Khan*²—probably all of them in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost*. In how far Milton may be indebted to Purchas' compendium for all sorts of quasi-geographical lore, in addition to the slight obligations already indicated, is a question lying rather in the province of the professed student of Milton. For the present writer, whose interest here is more particularly in Coleridge, it seems enough to point out the relationship between Coleridge's beautiful fragment and Milton's completed masterpiece; to indicate, in passing, Milton's greater distinctness and mastery in handling his material; finally, to suggest, on the basis of this brief paper, that, instead of continuing to treat *Kubla Khan* as a sort of incomparable *hapax legomenon*, wholly unexplainable, because

¹ *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, ll. 540-49.

² Compare, for example, Coleridge's "mighty fountain," "sinuous rills," and "meandering" river with the following, quoted by Todd: "In ipso hortorum apice fons est eximius, qui primum argenteis aquarum vorticibus ebulliens, mox diffusus in fluvium sinuosis flexibus, atque mœandris concisus oberrat, et felicia arva perennibus fœcundat rivulis."—P. Causinus, *de Elog.*, lib. XI., edit. 1634 (Todd, *Milton's Poetical Works* [1809], Vol. III, pp. 95, 96). Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, ll. 223 ff., and the first part of *Kubla Khan*.

incomparable, we shall understand it and its author better if we seek to trace the subtle, yet no less real, connection between them and the literature to which they belong. Specifically, let the reader of Coleridge be also a reader of Coleridge's master, Milton, and the lover of *Kubla Khan* a lover also of that "pleasant soil" in which "his far more pleasant garden God ordained."¹

LANE COOPER.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY.

¹ *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, l. 215.